Book Reviews


and

**Breakout Churches**, by Dr. Thom S. Rainer, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005

One might wonder what is to be accomplished by simultaneously reviewing Jim Collins’ national best seller on why some companies in America make the leap from being just good to being great, and the study by Thom Rainer and his research group on churches that have successfully emerged from a period of decline to a sustained period of growth and expansion. The answer is quite simple. Thom Rainer was so influenced by his reading of *Good to Great* that he built a research design around the basic principles contained in Collins’ book and tested the applicability of those principles to churches. The result is a fascinating study in how quantitative and qualitative research methods, rigorously applied, can yield similar findings. It turns out that great companies and great churches have a lot in common. It will be the purpose of this combined review to point out and evaluate the commonalities of these two important works.

**Selecting the Samples**

Collins’ team of researchers was determined to find those companies that had fifteen year stock returns at or below the general stock market, punctuated by a transition point, then followed by cumulative returns of at least three times the market over the next fifteen years. Starting from an initial list of 1,435 companies, Collins narrowed the list to only eleven companies that met the criteria. Once the list was compiled, eleven comparison companies were also identified. These were companies with similar products or services, similar size, and comparable history. Following this pattern of thought, Rainer’s team sought to identify those churches that had similarly “turned it around.” Starting with 52,333 churches, he applied a number of screens to narrow the search. Using work previously described in *Successful Evangelistic Churches* (reviewed in the Fall 2004 issue of CHARIS) Rainer identified those churches for which the most recent data indicated a “conversion ratio” of at least one new member for every 20 individuals in average Sunday church attendance. Second, the churches had to have a minimum of 26 conversions per year, thus eliminating very small churches which would potentially be statistical anomalies. The remaining churches needed to show at least five years of attendance declines, followed by a breakout year which was then followed by at least five years of worship attendance growth. The one difference in Rainer’s study from the screens applied by Collins was that the decline, breakout, and growth had to occur under the leadership of the same pastor. He chose to add this screen so that the turnaround couldn’t just be attributed to a change in leadership. Rainer ended up with only 13 churches that met these criteria. Rainer also identified a comparison group of churches.

**Methods**

Research teams analyzed quantitative data from the companies and the churches. Financial data was most valuable in companies, while membership and attendance data were most critical for churches. On site teams of researchers also conducted extensive interviews in both samples. In the case of churches, surveys of beliefs and values were also conducted.
Jim Collins’ team took five years to conduct its research. Thom Rainer’s group took about three years.

Findings

Collins’ team eventually described three phases of development that contributed to good companies becoming great: disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action. One of the more surprising findings for Collins was the nature of leadership. Rather than the flamboyant, charismatic, or genius leaders that one normally associates with outstanding companies, Collins found almost invariably that the CEO’s of great companies exhibited a balance between personal humility and professional will. These leaders were modest and subordinated their personal ambitions to the greater good of the company. They also maintained a singularity of vision and a persistence of will to pursue that vision.

Thom Rainer found a similar pattern among the pastors of breakout churches. What he called “Acts 6/7” leaders embody many of the same attributes as Collins’ “Level 5 Leaders.” Rainer describes eight keys to such leadership: fierce biblical faithfulness, tenure, confident humility, acceptance of responsibility, unconditional love of people, persistence, an outwardly-focused vision, and a desire for a lasting legacy.

Another surprising finding by Collins was in the area of people and plans. His team had expected that the first step to greatness would be a new vision and strategy to be followed by getting people committed and aligned behind that new direction. They found the opposite to be true.

“The executives who ignited the transformations from good to great did not first figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. No, they first got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and then figured out where to drive it.” (p.41)

Rainer described a similar finding in what he called the “who/what simultrack,” although he argued that people first and vision second didn’t necessarily best fit in a ministry model. Nevertheless, his team observed that church leaders, and in particular the lead pastor, had to be surrounded by the right people, whether other pastors, staff, or lay leaders. And while building a committed team, a singular vision of ministry had to be cultivated and maintained.

Both good to great companies and breakout churches experienced a defining moment, something Collins calls “confronting the brutal facts” and Rainer calls the “ABC (awareness, belief, crisis) moment” Complete honesty about the organization’s position is a necessary precursor to transformation.

What follows next in great companies and churches can best be described as the “hedgehog concept.” This unique idea flows from three insights that converge into a single, clear concept: (1) what you can be best in the world at; (2) what drives your economic engine; and (3) what you are deeply passionate about. Rainer calls this the “VIP factor,” i.e., the vision intersection profile. It consists of the intersection of three concepts: (1) leadership passion; (2) passion/gifts of the congregation; and (3) community needs.

The remainders of both books follow parallel paths and deal with the following compatible concepts:

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The flywheel effect       Big Mo

Conclusion

Can churches learn and benefit from the findings of business leadership research? Thom Rainer would argue that his research has confirmed that similar rules apply to the success of all types of organization. Finding inspiration and instruction from the likes of Collins and Rainer appears to be appropriate for any humanly constructed organization. In fact, Collins even talks about the economic engines of service organizations and non-profit corporations, and helps the reader apply his broad corporate findings to smaller non-profit contexts. Both studies examined existing organizations. Both authors argue that the insights can be learned and applied. Whether other lagging churches can “break out” will remain for future research.